

A number of legislative changes took place in Ireland in 2014. In October, the country passed a new freedom of information law, affirming and widening the public's ability to access information from government bodies. Also that month, the government established a new court of appeals to the judicial system, intended to ease the backlog of cases faced by the Supreme Court.

The Sinn Féin party's strong performance in both European Parliament (EP) and local elections in 2014 fueled speculation that the party was gaining momentum ahead of general elections in 2016.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

### **Political Rights: 39 / 40 [Key]**

#### **A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12**

The Irish Parliament (Oireachtas) consists of a lower house (the Dáil), whose 166 members are elected by proportional representation for five-year terms, and an upper house (the Seanad, or Senate) with 60 members, 11 appointed and 49 elected by various interest groups. The Senate is mainly a consultative body, with members serving five-year terms. The prime minister, or taoiseach, is chosen by Parliament. The president, whose functions are largely ceremonial, is directly elected for a seven-year term.

The most recent parliamentary elections took place in 2011. The Fine Gael party won 76 seats in the lower house and, lacking a majority, entered into a coalition with the Labour Party, which took 37 seats. The Fianna Fáil party captured only 20 seats. Sinn Féin won 14 seats, while independents and two smaller parties took the remaining seats. The Green Party failed to capture seats. Enda Kenny of Fine Gael was elected prime minister.

Ireland's Constitutional Convention concluded its work in February 2014 and issued several recommendations about the electoral system and social policies. Suggestions included reducing the voting age to 16, providing citizens with greater access to the presidential nomination and election process, and making various adjustments to the Dáil electoral procedures.

In the EP elections held in May 2014, Fine Gael won four seats, with Sinn Féin following with three, Fianna Fáil taking one, and independents capturing the remaining three. In local elections also held in May, Sinn Féin won 105 out of the 949 contested seats, a notable increase from the 54 out of 883 seats it had won in 2009. Sinn Féin followed in third place behind Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which remained the leading parties at the local level, while Labour came in fourth, sustaining heavy electoral losses.

#### **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 16 / 16**

Ireland's two largest parties—Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael—do not differ widely in ideology but represent opposing sides of the nation's 1922–23 civil war. Smaller parties include the Labour Party, Sinn Féin, and the Green Party. Fianna Fáil dominated politics after Ireland became independent, holding power for 61 out of 79 years before it was ousted in 2011 due to corruption scandals and the mismanagement of the 2008 economic crisis. Holding two-thirds of the seats, Enda Kenny's Fine Gael–Labour coalition currently holds

the largest parliamentary majority in Ireland's history. In 2013, opinion polls indicated that popularity was shifting between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael throughout the year. An October 2014 poll showed Sinn Féin and Fine Gael with comparable levels of support for the first time in Ireland's history.

### **C. Functioning of Government: 11 / 12**

Corruption—including cronyism, political patronage, and illegal donations—is a recurring problem. After 15 years of hearings, the Mahon Tribunal released its final report in March 2012, finding that corruption had affected “every level of Irish political life.” A new anticorruption bill was proposed in 2014, aiming to increase penalties for politicians found guilty of corruption and ban them from holding office for up to 10 years. Ireland was ranked 17 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

In October, Ireland passed the Freedom of Information Act of 2014. Broader in scope than similar laws passed previously, the act extended the application of freedom of information responsibilities to all public bodies, with some exemptions.

### **Civil Liberties: 58 / 60**

#### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 16 / 16**

Irish media are free and independent, and print media present a variety of diverse viewpoints. The state may censor material deemed indecent or obscene. Dozens of news outlets have closed in recent years as a result of falling advertising revenue. In October 2014, the government announced intentions to hold a public referendum, likely in 2015, on a controversial provision of the 2009 Defamation Act that made blasphemy punishable by heavy fines. Internet access is unrestricted.

Freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed. Although the country is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, there is no state religion, and adherents of other faiths face few impediments to religious expression. In recent years, Ireland has faced a notable decline in religiosity following a series of sexual abuse scandals linked to the clergy in the Catholic Church.

Academic freedom is respected. The Catholic Church operates approximately 90 percent of Ireland's schools. Most schools include religious education, although parents may exempt their children from it. The constitution requires equal funding for students requesting instruction in other faiths. There has been increasing public opposition in recent years to religious education in Irish schools.

#### **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12**

The rights of public assembly and demonstration are respected. Protests against government budget cuts and austerity measures continued in 2014. In October, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Dublin against a plan to directly charge households for water usage.

In January, 79-year-old peace activist and writer Margaretta D'Arcy began a three-month prison sentence for trespassing in restricted areas during protests against the use of Shannon Airport by the U.S. military.

D'Arcy's case sparked more protests, both against the use of the airport and against her incarceration.

Freedom of association is upheld, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can operate freely. Labor unions operate without hindrance, and collective bargaining is legal and unrestricted.

## **F. Rule of Law: 15 / 16**

Ireland has an independent judiciary and a legal system based on common law. A September 2014 study from the Council of Europe found Irish judges to be among the best-paid in Europe, despite recent salary decreases due to austerity measures. The report also noted that Ireland has fewer judges per capita than other European countries.

In October, the government established a new body—the Court of Appeals—to occupy a tier in the judicial system between the High Court and the Supreme Court. The new court, which was approved by a 2013 referendum, included nine judges and was intended to ease the Supreme Court's backlog.

Prison conditions are reportedly dangerous, unsanitary, and overcrowded. In October 2014, the government appointed Emily Logan as head of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission; Logan vowed to establish a timeline to reform the prison system.

The Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) disarmed in 2005 and is now outlawed after fighting for unification with Northern Ireland for 36 years. Several splinter groups have emerged over time. These groups occasionally engage in violent acts, but violence has moderated in recent years.

The Irish Travellers, a traditionally nomadic group of about 25,000 people, are not recognized as an ethnic minority and face discrimination in housing and hiring. Laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation exist, but some social stigma against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people persists in Ireland.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 15 / 16**

Discrimination in the workplace on the basis of gender or sexual orientation is illegal in Ireland. However, gender inequality in wage persists, and women are underrepresented in the work place. Women represent 1 percent of the lower house of Parliament. A law passed in 2012 declared that political parties must impose gender quotas in future elections, and those who fail to do so will lose half of their annual state funding.

Abortion remains a contentious issue in Ireland. A groundbreaking new law went into effect in January 2014, allowing for limited abortion rights in cases where a woman's life is under threat, including from the risk of suicide. Although there have been calls for a national referendum to further expand access to abortion, the strength of Catholic traditions in the country has generated friction around the issue.

In 2010, the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act legally recognized same-sex couples, although it denied them some rights, such as adoption, that are awarded to heterosexual married couples. A long-delayed referendum on same-sex marriage is scheduled for 2015, with early polling in 2014 suggesting that there is considerable support for the extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples.

A 2009 report released by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse showed decades of widespread physical and emotional abuse against children in state institutions and by Catholic priests, as well as collusion to hide the abuse. In September 2014, Ireland adopted an international declaration to help protect children online as part of the Global Alliance Against Online Child Sexual Abuse.

**Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

**[Full Methodology](#)**